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Food as Ritual, Routine or Convention

David Marshall

This paper looks at the importance of understanding situations and context in food consumption focusing on the rituals, habits and conventions of eating meals. It argues that meals provide a link to the wider community reflecting the shared understanding that underpins much of our routine food consumption. In looking at meals, as objects and events, it argues that they offer continuity with the past and reflect cultural ideas about eating “properly”. Drawing on research among recently married or co-habiting young Scottish couples it shows the importance attached to eating evening meals together and a strong adherence to traditional while accommodating more variety and scope for individual preferences in different parts of the meal system. It concludes that meal rituals and routines are likely to remain an important part of eating despite claims about the individualisation of this consumption practice.

Keywords: Consumption; Eating Rituals; Food Conventions; British Meals

Simmel started his discussion of eating and drinking with a paradox: namely, he stated that eating and drinking are common to all human beings but at the same time they are the most selfish and individual activities ... Because eating combines this completely egotistical interest in an exemplary manner with social interaction and being together, it exercises an enormous importance in all communities, of which the best proof are the innumerable rules and prohibitions that regulate it everywhere. These rules can, among other things, concern the people with whom one is allowed to share a meal. (Gronow 1997, 136–37)

One could argue that food is extraordinary in its ordinariness, exceptional in the extent to which we treat it as mundane, and outstanding as a focus for the study of consumption. Much of the emphasis in consumption has been on the extraordinary,¹ the conspicuous, and individual choice at the expense of “ordinary consumption” (Gronow and Warde 2001). Yet, much of our engagement with food is unspectacular and inconspicuous, undertaken in private, and regulated by a series of unspoken rules regarding eating. The frequent, diurnal nature of this consumption practise implies routine and often unreflexive (un)conscious decisions.² This is the stuff of ordinary consumption and the focus of this paper.

The paper begins by looking at taste and the extent to which it is socially constructed, arguing that while food choice is often portrayed as a matter of personal “taste” what we eat is ultimately shaped by social and cultural factors, as reflected in the opening quote. The paper goes on to examine the continuing role of community in eating, manifest through the adherence to certain praxis centred on shared ideas about the nature of ritual, routine, and convention. The paper examines the role of meals in food choice and argues that much of the symbolic meaning depends not simply on *what* is served but on *how* food is actually used not only in the rituals, but the routines and conventions of daily eating.

(Extra)Ordinary Consumption

The etymological roots of “consumption” come from “consumere” (cum sumere) meaning to use up entirely and involves the destruction of matter, and “consummare” (cum summa), to sum up or carry to completion (Barnhart 1988; Williams 1982). At one level it literally means to eat or drink and is therefore constitutive of consumption. In many ways food is an appropriate subject matter for the study of consumption and as Falk notes “oral consumption ... eating implies the consumption (dissolving, using up) of the food but it is also simultaneously as process of production—or better, construction ... reproducing or constructing life on all levels, from the physical to the social” (Falk 1994, 95).

Food, in this respect, presents a distinctive type of consumption good, and one in which there is literally no escape from the more mundane, but essential, question about the impact of consumption on the body. Food is fuel but it is much more. We literally consume (eat) the product, it becomes part of us, and what we don’t use becomes excrement. Ingestion brings about a transformation in the product as the body breaks down the food in order to sustain, build and repair, in this respect it is simply a means to an end—existence and survival—as opposed to an end in itself.³ The (re)construction of the body comes from the destruction of the food. As Falk (1994) notes, while other consumables, in a broader sense of the term, are displayed on the body (clothing, jewellery), or applied and absorbed by the body (creams, lotions), or incorporated and become part of the body (tattoos, implants, piercing) few are actually ingested (food, drinks, medicines), although some are temporarily incorporated and then (r)ejected (toothpaste and mouthwash). He goes on to argue that the classification of “food” as edible or inedible draws the distinction between that which can be incorporated or “taken in” to the community, and then our bodies. In this respect the community regulates what is deemed permissible and acceptable for the members. Moreover, this reflects both material-physiological constraints, certain items cannot be assimilated, as well as cultural constraints that may prohibit otherwise available and (objectively) edible items, for example, insects, as well as permitting items (objectively) defined as non-food, for example, tobacco, cocoa leaves. As he goes on to comment, food preferences are subject to sensory and cultural influences. This (re)construction of the body is as much a social phenomenon and eating both mirrors and at the same time constitutes social relations. Food must be not only good to eat it must be “good to think” (Levi Strauss 1963). Let us start with the question of “taste” in food consumption.

“de gustibus disputandum non est”

Consumption in modern (mass) consumer society is seen as being highly individualistic even to the extent of being narcissistic (Desmond 2002).⁴ In this respect eating can be regarded as one of the most highly individualised consumption activities. If one follows the line that we eat what tastes good then taste, in the biological sense, becomes a matter for the individual.⁵ Taste can be conceived of in a variety of ways from concerns surrounding dietary recommendations and nutritional status of foods, focusing on sensory qualities through to questions about gastronomy and representations in cookery books and domestic manuals. Biological perspectives regard taste as an inherent property of the food itself, or a physiological response of an individual to a substance. Sensory evaluation of food measures variable responses

to the taste stimulus but within the parameters of social acceptability and what is considered appropriate (McCorkindale 1992).

Social and cultural perspectives view taste as a pattern of preferences and a way of describing aesthetic norms. This recognises the extent to which food consumption is regulated as much via social and cultural influences as it is by any biological or physiological response, and further acknowledges the community influence as the arbiter of “good taste”. Gronow (1997) illustrates this social construction of “good taste” in food, and fashion, and explores the relationship between consumption and class. As he notes the idea that there is no dispute over matters of taste reflected a belief that “good” taste was self-evident and shared by everyone to such an extent that “the physiological or gustatory sense of taste often acted as a model for the aesthetic judgement of taste” (Gronow 1997, 86). But as he goes on to explain sensory pleasure does not equate with aesthetic pleasure. He explores Kant’s antinomy of taste and the theoretical problems with the notion of “taste” as some type of undisputed universal and, at the same time, subjective entity. While the sensual pleasures of eating are completely individualised eating is a highly social activity and regulated by the community.

This question of class is important in drawing the distinction between taste and “good taste” (Bourdieu 1984). Discussing Bourdieu’s perspective on taste Gronow notes: “legitimate taste pretends to be the universally valid and disinterested good taste, whereas in reality it is nothing more than the taste of a particular class, the ruling class” (Gronow 1997, 11). But this type of social emulation leads to a somewhat static and conformist pattern of consumption devoid of creativity and imagination failing to account for the demand for innovation and novelty in modern consumption (Gronow 1997; Warde 1991). For Gronow contemporary fashion plays a similar role to tradition in guiding modern consumers providing new obligations directing and guiding consumption patterns. In this respect the shift is more towards the aesthetic aspects of eating and away from the utilitarian concerns, as reflected in nutritional and dietary debates. Our over reliance on the sensory aspects of eating as an explanation for choice ignores the “standards” imposed by our participation in eating as a social activity, it excludes community. Social influences can over-ride physiological evaluations, for example, our learning to like chilli, or coffee, or alcohol in spite of the taste!

Consuming stimulates all of the senses “richly and subtly interwoven in our experiences” and yet it is the attempt to transform this brutish behaviour and to gain some distance from the primitive that leads us to the symbolic aspects of eating and emphasises the ritualistic side of consumption, shifting the emphasis from the sensory to the symbolic (Barthes [1961] 1979; Levy 1996). Goods are consumed for what they come to mean, not just what they do, and become important as “markers” of social position and indicative of social inclusion (or exclusion) (Douglas and Isherwood 1979). Importantly, for Barthes, meaning depends on how food is used and these meanings are not fixed but dependent on the context, as he notes “(f)ood has a constant tendency to transform itself into situation” (Barthes [1961] 1979, 00). The value of the food lies more in the “protocol” than the nutritive value or function and the relationship between food and the social situation in which it is used has changed (Gofton 1986). Consequently we cannot take meanings as given, for example, the use of fresh fish in British cuisine reflects both inherent qualities of the product and ideas about when and for whom it is appropriate. Fresh fish may be seen as “healthy” but it is often considered inappropriate for a main meal centrepiece and not suitable for men and children (for different reasons). Add to this the impracticalities of buying, storing,

preparing, and cooking fresh fish and one can begin to understand its restricted place within the British meal pattern. The symbolic meaning resides not simply in the product, or the taste, but is reflected in all of the activities that are involved in consuming a product that does not fit easily into the established routine and renders it inappropriate for particular types of occasion (Marshall 1993). The context in which food is consumed plays an important part in what it comes to signify shifting attention towards the eating occasion.

Eating Rituals or Routines

Ilmonen (2001) discusses the Durkheimian interpretation of ritual as a means of creating social order and strengthening group solidarity⁶ and explores Malinowski's idea that rituals serve as devices that reduce anxiety arising from uncertainty about what to do in certain situations. In the case of food consumption they act as scripts regulating the sequence and order of dishes and provide guidelines on appropriateness and comportment in certain situations. As Rook (1985) notes individuals' experiences of rituals are extensive, varied, and complex making it difficult to capture this diversity in a single definition. The focus on ritual as experiences in religious or mystic contexts is too restrictive and he defines ritual as "a type of expressive, symbolic activity, constructed of multiple behaviours that occur in a fixed episodic sequence, and that tend to be repeated over time. Ritual behaviour is dramatically scripted and acted out and is performed with formality, seriousness and inner intensity" (Rook 1985, 252). He takes a broad perspective and in identifying ritual artefacts, scripts, (performance) roles, and audience provides a framework within which to study rituals. Rook offers a typology of ritual experiences that includes the family meal along with office lunches, and pancake day rituals as group learning. Rites of passage rituals, such as weddings, are associated with specific meals and ritual artefacts and scripts. Many of the food festivities celebrated in *We Gather Together* (Humphrey and Humphrey 1988), capture this ritualistic aspect of family and community get together at clambakes, barbecues, birthday parties, and Halloween each with their own celebratory foods. They refer to the work of the food folklorist Charles Camp who stressed the need to focus on the eating event and to understand what the act of eating together meant for those involved.

Arnould and Price (2000) see rituals as one manifestation of "authoritative performance"⁷ that offer a collective sense of identity and integration among participants. Authoritative performances create and sustain shared traditions that link the individual and the community. These depend on active participation to provide the authoritative voice and achieve a sense of community for those involved. However, they argue that seeking community by engaging in authoritative performances prohibits highly individualised and differentiated experiences, or "authenticating acts", in which individual products are creatively transformed through production or by linking them to the self narrative. Tetrault and Kleine (1990) draw further distinctions between ritual and ritualised behaviour where private enactment and idiosyncratic role assimilation are characteristic.

Habits and conventions have a similar function to rituals but they differ in the sense that they are often followed without "conscious reflection" and are considered profane, rather than sacred, "they both belong to behavioural categories of routine that are part of the mundane mess of daily life" (Ilmonen 2001, 13). Weber (1968) saw conventions as lying somewhere between the social routines and regularities of customs and the explicit norms embodied in laws. Conventions are sanctioned by

social approval and while we are often aware of the conventions this is not always the case with these practices, somewhere between normatively regulated behaviour and pure social habits and individual routines (Gronow and Warde 2001). Ilmonen, after Connerton (1989), contrasts routine with ritual where sanctions apply when strict rules are breached. Routines are “second nature” that allow individuals to deal with contingent circumstances and make “everyday life” easier. Routines give us a sense of what is “normal”. In addition they reduce the complexity of decision-making (saving one’s energy), and make behaviour more predictable (and trustworthy). In the process they are restrictive and challenge the idea of the consumer as a “free agent” (Ilmonen 2001). This raises some interesting questions in terms of food choice where establishing routines and habits is in part a response to the idea that food (consumption) is often treated as mundane. Yet as Erikson (1982) shows in linking major rituals, such as rites of passage symbolising an individual’s change in social status, to daily rituals it is the latter that operationalise the transformation. Food is both ritual and routine, but perhaps our attention should be directed towards more habitual forms of engagement and the daily conventions of eating.

As the previous section illustrates, rituals are by their very nature reflective of a shared understanding about how to behave and are clearly located within a social context. What then is the role of ritual and routine in modern society? The alleged demise of the family meal, or the growth in snacking and grazing, reflect this sense of “anomie” and trend towards individualisation that raises questions over the relevance of ritual in contemporary society. The postmodern turn suggests that structural constraints on eating, meal structures, and formats, are less important in shaping consumption practises that have become highly individualised. Despite these claims about individualisation and informalisation Warde (1997) presents evidence of the continuing normative regulation in food consumption that characterise (British) class culture. Even in a highly individualised society routines and habits remain and as Campbell (1996, 149) argues one cannot equate individualisation with the loss of “taken-for-granted routines and habits” (cited in Gronow and Warde 2001, 226). Ritualistic behaviour remains significant but it is more likely to be found in certain situations, for example, a formal dinner is still a highly ritualised activity and one where the manner of consuming is as important as what is consumed, and the form is as valuable as any functional considerations.

Ritual is action frequently repeated, in a form largely laid down in advance; it aims to get those actions right. Everyone present knows what should happen, and notices when it does not. Dinner too is habitual, and aims at order and communication, at satisfying both the appetite of the diners and their expectations as to how everyone present should behave. In this sense, a meal can be thought of as a ritual and a work of art, with limits laid down, desires aroused and fulfilled, enticements, variety, patterning and plot. As a work of art, not only in the overall form but also the details matter intensely. (Visser 1993,)

Visser’s observations on the dinner ritual reflect the importance of aesthetics in eating. Gronow (1997), discussing Simmel’s 1910 essay on the meal, shows how the beauty of the meal resides in its purity of form rather than in any sensory-physiological aspects of eating. It is the social form, or interaction, of the meal that embodies the aesthetics and the more it extols these aspects the less it serves the satisfaction of needs and hunger. The meaning resides in the ritual of the eating occasion. One cannot simply consume but has to know how to consume. There are echoes here of Bourdieu’s (1984) “cultural capital” and the distinctions and social

demarcation that can be drawn through this consumption practice. He discusses the importance of form in the bourgeois meal and the requirement for restraint in eating where one has to wait until others have eaten and observe a strict sequencing of dishes. According to Bourdieu it is the middle class who turn the meal into a social ceremony and distance themselves from the material, substance, and function. In the process they shift the focus away from food as nourishment to food as form. “Taste” becomes a social rather than a sensory issue.

Meal stylisation, form, and structure may be as revealing as the etiquette and manners that Elias (1978) refers to in his treatise of table manners and civility. Consumption can be “courteous”, reflecting the essence of civility, and highly internalised. In contrast the working class meal is free and easy and characterised by plenty. Abundance is the norm, on special occasions, and freedom is expressed in the absence of a strict sequencing of dishes, everything may be taken to, and from, the table, other activities may take, be undertaken, and plates used between dishes. In this case food is for eating and enjoying, the celebration is in the substance rather than the form (Bourdieu 1984, 195). The manner in which food is consumed makes for the distinguishing character of the meal. Holt (1995, 1998), refers to the way in which consumers use consumption objects to classify themselves in relation to relevant others and discusses both classification through objects, reflecting Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital, as well as classification through actions. The latter illustrates the extent to which social distinction depends on *how* one interacts with the object. This seems relevant in the case of food, where one can look at both what is being consumed and in turn how it is consumed. It is not simply a case of what is eaten but can be extended to consider how it is acquired, prepared, cooked, and eaten. This process and practice can reveal much about “cultural capital” and knowing how to consume takes the debate back to ritual, routine, and eating properly.

Eating Conventions

Much of our understanding of food consumption is focused on the relationship between those doing the consuming, individual or group, and individual items. Consumption is often taken out of context, just as traditional sensory testing in the laboratory excludes social and market factors in the assessment of acceptability so it fails to acknowledge the meanings associated with eating (Garber, Hyatt, and Starr 2003). Consequently the analysis of food consumption is often highly individualised and devoid of any social context, a reflection perhaps of the ontological nature of sensory research where the focus is on intrinsic properties of the food relating to taste, flavour, texture, and so on. There have been calls to extend the investigation of choice beyond the sensory but even this may be insufficient to capture the consumer experience (Marshall 2003). Despite its customary nature little attention has been given to the ways in which our consumption is directed by the tradition of eating meals, many of which are fairly conventional and routine. At a practical level this can prove problematic, not least because consumers find it difficult to articulate a clear definition of “ordinary” meals (Chiva 1997; Prättälä, Mäkelä, and Roos 1994⁸). This, in part, reflects the often taken for granted and implicit nature of the consumption experience, itself a characteristic of much routine behaviour. Lalonde (1992, 70) considers the meal as both as object (a timely repast and structural entity) and an event (scripted purposeful action and a meaningful social event).

This idea of meal as object acknowledges the pattern of eating and the fact that consumption is located throughout different parts of the day, week, and year marking

the passing of time and certain events. Much of our eating is very ordinary and the daily routine of eating breakfast, lunch and/or dinner is interspersed with snacks. Prättälä (2000) identified the decrease in the number of daily meals in Nordic countries from three or four hot meals daily to one or two. The meal schedule remains but cooked meals are being replaced by lighter eating events and there was something of a reluctance to change meal patterns. Another observation was the disappearance of the cooked breakfast. These changes can be explained in part by general socioeconomic development and living conditions over the last century. Food availability in modern society has also tended to smooth out these “calendrical” aspects of eating (Mintz 1992). Meal patterns also show regional variation, for example in China three meals a day and dim sum is popular in the south of the country while two meals a day are more common in the north, particularly in winter. Although the same meal may be served at any time through the day (Newman 2000).

Table 1 offers one classification of British meals eaten at home that incorporates the food cooking and processing along with temporal and social characteristics. It includes celebratory, main (weekend/midweek), light meals, and snacks in the domestic meal repertoire. This is a speculative conceptual typology that attempts to combine these key elements as a means of categorising British meal conventions (Marshall 2000). It is strongly influenced by the seminal work of Douglas (1972) into structural aspects of eating and the way in which meals are representative of social relationships between the participants. She sees food as a code communicating and reflecting this pattern of relationships. The meal code for a proper meal, in this case a ritualised occasion such as Christmas lunch, is A (stressed course) + $2B$ (unstressed course). Sunday lunch is $2A$ and the weekday lunch A . In Table 1 a further categorisation is made between the main weekday meal A (+ B) and the light meal. This structure is mirrored in the individual courses where a (stressed item) + $2b$ (unstressed item). The pattern is repeated throughout the system and the inclusion or exclusion of courses or components signifies the nature of the occasion and those present. This structure is reflected in the British idea of the “proper meal” comprising one course, usually hot meat (or less commonly fish), served with potatoes, vegetables, and doused with gravy (Charles and Kerr 1988; Murcott 1982, 1995). Essentially it is meals that drive food choices and structure individual routines determining what is appropriate to serve. Much has been made of the rigidity of the structural approach but there is still adequate opportunity for individual choice while maintaining social and cultural conventions regarding meal structure and form. This is not to say that these conventions cannot be flouted but this is the way we “do meals”. What is consumed, both in the broad sense of food provisioning and in the narrow sense of what we actually eat, is constrained by what we have come to recognise as a meal. The shift from snacks, through light meals, main meals, and up to special occasions brings with it a different set of practices with regard not only to what is served, but how much is served, the time and effort put into the task, and so on. These occasions differ in their degree of formality, drama, bracketing (in time and space), purpose, and scripted sequences (Holt 1992). What we are seeing is a shift in the types of meal being served rather than any fundamental change in the nature of these eating occasions.

Table 1 A speculative temporal, structural, and social typology of British eating occasions (Marshall 2000)

	MEAL PATTERN		MEAL STRUCTURE AND FORMAT					SOCIAL ASPECTS
		Frequency	Meal structure	Course form	Cooking status	Ingredients	Typical meals	Participants
MEALS	CELEBRATORY/ FESTIVE MEALS	Infrequent, several times a year	A+2B (formal meal structure)	a+2b	Hot cooked, prepared by main domestic cook (usually female) with some assistance from other family members, or occasionally outside caterers.	Special ingredients, mainly fresh or unprocessed, high quality, variety of foods. Emphasis on meat.	Wedding meal, christening meal, birthday meal, Christmas dinner, etc.	Household extended family plus guests, normally seated at table, increasingly eaten outside home.
	MAIN MEALS (WEEKEND– SUNDAY)	Regular usually once per week, month	2A	a+2b	Hot cooked, prepared by main domestic cook (usually female).	Special ingredients, specific dishes and foods, mainly fresh, good quality. Emphasis on meat.	Weekend meal, “traditional Sunday lunch”, (midday)	Household eating together at home, eating same food, occasionally extended family and guests. Seated at table.
	MAIN MEALS (WEEKDAY)	Every couple of days, once a day	A(+B)	a+2b	Hot cooked, prepared by main domestic cook (usually female).	Familiar foods, generally acceptable, fresh chilled or frozen, good value. Some convenience foods such as cooking sauces.	Midweek meal, “dinner”, (early evening)	Household eating together at home, head of household present, most eating same food. Seated at table occasionally in front of television.
	LIGHT MEALS	Daily, two or three every day	A	a+b	Hot cooked/cold pre- cooked or uncooked. Prepared by main domestic cook or eater.	Frozen or canned products more common, convenience items ready meals, limited preparation or take home items.	Midweek or weekend meal, “lunch” (midday), “(high) tea” (afternoon)	At home not all household members present, head of household or children absent, or individuals eating alone, may be eating different foods. Not necessarily at table. Some eaten outside home.
SNACKS	SNACK	Most days	–	a	No further cooking, prepared by eater.	Emphasis on convenience, processed foods, or takeaway.	Anytime, “supper” (late evening).	Individual eating alone, or with others but not necessarily eating same food. Eating on the move, often eaten outside home.

Special occasions, for example, remain highly ritualised with certain dishes, or specific foods associated with these meals. There is little or no choice about what to serve for Christmas dinner, Sunday lunch, or on Thanksgiving. These are highly symbolic consumption events with specified scripts and roles (Rook 1985; Tetrault and Kleine 1990; Wallendorf and Arnould 1990). Outside of these occasions main meals, and light meals, are much more routine and “ordinary”. They have structure and form but are much less formal than special occasions and there is much greater latitude for interpretation regarding what is appropriate.

While the structural approach might be seen as too restrictive, a postmodern perspective fails to account for the importance of the routines and habits in our consumption practice. Our obsession with ritual at the expense of convention has contributed to the lack of attention being paid to “ordinary consumption”. Everyday meal conventions operate as a sort of shorthand device helping with the decision making by signalling what is appropriate and might be compared with Lamont’s (1992) idea of “mental maps” to categorise practises, people, objects, place, and time. Moreover, within this categorisation differences in interpretation of what is appropriate is likely to reflect subtleties related to the quality of the food, the cost, the source of the ingredients. Warde (1997) has been able to identify class differences in terms of what food is consumed but the abundance of choice today makes it increasingly difficult to categorise people simply on this basis. It may be instructive to consider not simply what is being eaten but how this can be accommodated within a meals framework

These structural elements are evident in other cultures, for example Newman (2000) describes family meals in China comprising a large bowl of *fan*, a word that translates as both rice and meal, along with three or four dishes to flavour the fan or depending on who is present at the table. At main meals more meat and seafood dishes are served with or without vegetables and visa versa. These are accompanied by one or two soups served with the rice. Special occasions are marked with special foods in other cultures, for example, shark’s fin or bird’s nest soup, jelly fish, bears paw, snake at a sixteenth birthday or wedding celebration. Long noodles at birthdays wishing long life, or lotus root for a long and stable marriage. The cost of the meal and scarcity of the ingredients are important status markers at such occasions (Newman 2000). Japanese meals include soup, rice Japanese pickles (*tsukemono*) and side dishes and meals are recognised by the “rice-soup-side-dishes” structure (Cwierka 2002). Similarly, for southern Indians and Tamils, a meal, consists of boiled rice, a meat or vegetable thin stew/soup (*sambar*), lentils (*dahl*), a peppery soup (*rasam*), a dry vegetable dish (*puriyal*), and salad all served together (Caplan 2002). There is clearly some flexibility in terms of what is served as found in studies among immigrant populations who endeavour to maintain the character of the meal while incorporating unfamiliar foods (Cwierka and Walraven 2002). Most notable here is the study by Goode, Curtis, and Theophano (1984) who found their Italian American community had added and deleted formats and accommodated foods in certain meals that were less content specific. This was further evidence of the ability to permit flexibility in choice while maintaining the character and identity of the meal (as Italian). Koctürk (1995) contrasts north European meals where staple ingredients (potatoes, breads) are usually served with foods from the meat/fish/eggs or milk/cheese food groups with Hindu vegetarian meals that combine staples (rice, breads) with vegetables or legumes. She believes change is more likely to occur in the “accessory” foods that accompany the staple and complementary foods.

The meal is more than an object; it is an event or lived experience where the senses (visual, taste, smell, touch, sound) meet with emotions and cognitive energies (Lalonde 1992). This interpretation of meal as event sees the joining of the physiological, psychological, and sociological in a highly symbolic event. Celebratory or festive meals such as Christmas dinner or Thanksgiving represent ritual family feasts that reaffirm cultural and social unity associated with the use of specific foods (Siskind 1992; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). In many cases there is little negotiation over what is served, and in this respect Arnould and Price (2000) are correct in their assumption about authoritative performances restricting authenticating acts.

In the case of main meals, for example the Sunday (roast) dinner that is seen as constitutive of British family life, these are also highly ordered events with clear guidelines about what is appropriate food, the number of courses (2A), who gets to carve and serve the roast, and the whole sequence of events including where people sit, what cutlery and plates are used. Irrespective of how frequently, or infrequently, it is served it remains an important event for many households where extended family and/or guests may be included (or excluded).

Weekday main meals are more likely to be private events and much less formal with fewer courses but more opportunity for individual members of the household to eat different foods, and omit courses or specific items. In the case of light meals these are more likely to be individual affairs with participants eating different courses. This is the place for convenience foods, or more highly processed items. Meals can be eaten from the package, or ready meals served, there is less use of utensils or the need to sit at the table.

Finally, snacks are least formal both in terms of what can be eaten, often individual items are consumed, and these are more likely to be habitual than routine. Moreover these more informal eating occasions do not necessarily require hot cooked foods, or sitting at a table, or the use of ritual artefacts such as special plates or cutlery. Although the term “snacks” may be subject to a wide interpretation and somewhat ambiguous (Chauenton et al. 2003).

What we have seen is an increasing informality in eating and a shift towards lighter meals and snacking with a corresponding shift away from highly ritualised events. The growth in demand for ready meals, snacking and convenience foods (BBC 2002) suggests a breakdown in meals but these products may only be appropriate for certain types of occasion, or for use in specific parts of the meal. It is only by looking at contextual and situational aspects of consumption that we can fully understand these changes in consumption and consumer choice.

Meal Routines in Transition

Research into the eating habits of young Scottish couples revealed the importance attached to the establishment of regular meals together, at least in the early stages of the marriage or co-habitation. In a small sample of 22 couples we observed a pattern of three meals per day, interspersed with various “snacks”. These three meals comprised breakfast, lunch, and dinner which was regarded by many of the study group as their main meal of the day. Unlike breakfast and lunch, most of the couples ate the evening meal, or dinner, together at home. This was partly due to the practical constraints of work or study schedules but dinner was seen as an important part of living together and of the transformation into a married or co-habiting couple. The structure and form of the dishes were fairly conventional and many ate the same meal

as their partner although there was sufficient opportunity for individuals to accommodate their own preferences. A number of couples saw it as a focal point in the day and a pivotal aspect of many other food consumption related activities. In a number of households dinner provided an important opportunity for interaction not only when eating together but preparing the meal, cooking, and washing up.

Many couples talked about the importance of eating “proper” meals a term usually associated with traditional family units. The conventions varied across the study group but included sitting down together and eating at the table or eating in front of the television. A wide range of evening meals were served ranging from traditional platter type meals such as meat and potatoes through to gravy/one pot ethnic dishes illustrating both the continuity in food habits and a willingness to try new foods and new dishes. “Eating properly” was considered important but was also subject to broad interpretation reflecting the re-conceptualisation of the “proper meal” and the latitude for variation within the convention of the main meal category. For many it was more of a normative than a rigid construct regulating food consumption (Marshall and Anderson 2002). There was evidence of one main meal in the day often with one main course and perhaps a dessert or sweet to follow. The three course structure was only apparent in the Sunday lunch and occasional meals with guests. The question of how food was used raises some interesting issues, often it was not the presence or absence of a certain food but how it was prepared and cooked that signified the nature of the event. The majority of meals recorded over the seven day diary period were fairly conventional events with the couple eating and dining together in an informal and relaxed manner. The most significant aspect for a number of the couples was actually eating together and being with their partner with the meaning residing in the routine.

At this early stage in living together there was relatively little indication of couple’s involvement in commensal eating and the focus was on establishing their own routines and conventions. Individual roles and responsibilities included shopping for food as well as food preparation and cooking. Their food consumption was driven by a desire to establish their own shared routines that conformed to existing conventions and allowed them to eat “properly” while at the same time try new foods, or dishes, as they learnt about each others tastes and preferences. Domestic meals were structured and orderly without being entirely predictable. This depended on the eating occasion, for example, more formal meals such as Sunday dinner (lunch) were fairly standard across the study group but evening meals appeared much more variable, particularly in the willingness to use pasta and rice, as opposed to potatoes as the staple component. In several cases these were used as direct substitutes for potatoes. Eating conventions appear to provide broad guidelines on what is appropriate and offer some continuity in food habits but at the same time there was scope to accommodate change by the (re)interpretation of what was proper through integrating new foods into certain parts of the meal system and by expanding the range of meals served, for example, including Indian or Chinese dishes in their meal repertoire. It may be that the desire for novelty and innovation, that characterise modern consumption, are realised in other ways, such as eating out as opposed to being in, and an integral part of domestic eating. It has been argued elsewhere that eating out is a source of pleasure and satisfaction (Warde and Martens 2000).

Conclusion

Most meals are somewhat ordinary, not the stuff of elaborate banquets, fancy dinner parties, or extracts from the latest celebrity chef cookbook. This paper has shown that food consumption needs to be put into context and considered in the light of numerous social regulations regarding eating. These are manifest through eating events and what are commonly called “meals”. Furthermore, consumption meanings reside as much in the rituals, routines and conventions of eating as they do in individual foods. Taking the investigation beyond rituals to consider “ordinary” eating may be more representative of our engagement with food. These everyday meals have come to symbolise the relationship between participants and represent an important point where domestic production and consumption converge. As Ilmonen (2001) notes, in discussing routines, consumers are not free agents but subject to all manner of restrictions in their choice behaviour. This paper argues that meals continue to regulate individual choice and reflect the sustained impact of community on eating, questioning the individualisation⁹ of food consumption which often chooses to ignore the importance of context and the collective in much of our engagement with food.

It may be instructive to undertake more empirical research into the meal as object to examine the conventional nature of the meal and the extent to which the meal structures and formats are evident in a more representative sample. Food surveys or food diaries could be used to build a picture of meal structures and explore how different households interpret and adhere to the rules and conventions. There has been little cross cultural work on meals or consideration of the ways in which eating occasions impact upon other food consumption activities such as shopping for food and this offers a rich area for further research.

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Notes

- [1] The rules and prohibitions of eating are usually centred on the spectacular, for example the sumptuous feasts of King Solomon, or the banquets at the Palace of Versailles from the reign of Louis XIV to Charles X, or the ostentatious displays of conspicuous consumption in Veblen’s leisure class at the end of the end of the nineteenth century (Symons 2000, 268–69)
- [2] Most of us eat everyday, several times a day, and those who are less fortunate are consumed by the idea of consuming food. It is essential to our survival and well-being yet in abundance we take it for granted and regard it as somewhat mundane, ordinary, even boring. Try to remember what you had for lunch a couple of days ago, assuming you had lunch, or what you ate for dinner last Saturday? Can you remember what you bought on your last food-shopping trip? Most of us find it hard to recall what we ate, or bought, unless the occasion was exceptional in terms of the food, the company, and/or the location. Food is the stuff of sensory and short-term memory, the hedonism brief, and the pleasure momentary. With satiety comes temporary respite that allows us to forget the foraging and get on with what we were doing.
- [3] One might argue that in many developed societies much of what we eat is superfluous to our nutritional requirements and over consumption is manifest in new sorts of problems such as obesity.

- [4] Desmond traces the rise of consumer society and the increasing significance in the individual. He sees modern consumers as “narcissists to the extent that consumption is regarded as a frivolous individual activity opposed to the solidarity which is regarded through “honest” work. In addition, the typical consumer is thought of as an individual who achieves a form of identity through consumption” (Desmond 2002, 3).
- [5] Although, as McCorkindale (1992) notes, an explanation of taste based on what we are used to tells us little about the determinants of taste.
- [6] Not only does this serve as a means of inclusion but it excludes outsiders from participating in the group activities (Douglas 1982)
- [7] Arnould and Price describe this as a collective display aimed at inventing or recreating cultural traditions.
- [8] While their interviewees could recognise meals, they found the definition of a meal problematic.
- [9] This position does not deny the individualisation process but questions the strength of that process more generally and the extent to which it is evident across the meal system.

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